

Fairbury's African American History 1923-2021

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For: Fairbury Blade newspaper
Date: February 15, 2021

Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. From its founding until the early 1920s, as many as 100 African Americans lived peacefully in Fairbury. The African Methodist Episcopal church was built before 1885 and was located at the southwest corner of Walnut and Second streets. The children of African Americans were fully integrated into the Fairbury school system and were members of the high school athletic teams. Deceased African Americans were buried in Graceland cemetery with the other white citizens.

In 1915, D. W. Griffith produced the silent film "The Birth of a Nation." This film mythologized the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. An old Fairbury photograph has an advertisement for this silent film, which was shown at the Third Street Opera House.

This film helped launch a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the Midwest in the early 1920s. In the 1923-1926 era, the Ku Klux Klan held recruiting events in all the small towns around Fairbury. Three meetings of the KKK were held in Fairbury. The first meeting was held in September of 1923. Five to eight thousand people from all over the state gathered in a field at the Bartle Steidinger farm north of Fairbury. A small fiery cross was at the gate, with two larger ones in the center of the field. One of these crosses was red, and the other white, and both signs were electric lighted. The white cross was ten or twelve feet high and could be seen for quite a distance. On the night of the meeting, 165 men were initiated as members of the KKK.

In October of 1923, Reverend Patton of Assumption, Illinois, gave a KKK recruiting speech in Fairbury. On June 27, 1924, a Klan meeting was held at the W. D. Spence farm south of Fairbury. In October of 1924, a county-wide meeting of the KKK was held at Pontiac's Chautauqua Park.

In May of 1924, an Illinois miner's state convention was held with 800 coal mining union representatives in attendance. Two of those representatives were Fairbury coal miners. They were Edward Carlson, President, and R.A. McAllister, Secretary of the Fairbury local union.

The two Fairbury coal miners were among the most strenuous opponents the Klan faced on a convention floor. The resolution introduced by Carlson and McAllister made membership in the KKK organization an impossibility for any miner. The convention adopted the Fairbury proposal.

The Fairbury Blade newspaper has many stories about the KKK between 1923 and 1926. The resurgence movement of the KKK lost steam nationally in the late 1920s. Consequently, there are no Fairbury Blade KKK related stories after 1926.

The highest racial tensions in Fairbury occurred in 1928. Twenty-nine-year-old James Churchill was driving a heavy horse-drawn wagon full of rock on First Street by the Vermilion River. In those days, cars were supposed to give the right-a-way to the massive horse-drawn wagons. Thirty-year-old Leroy Harice Carter was a young African American who lived in Fairbury. Leroy went fishing in the Vermilion River with three older African American women. Leroy was driving an automobile owned by one of the women. This group finished fishing and started to go back to Fairbury on First Street. When the car encountered the heavy horse-drawn wagon, there was a heated argument about who had the right-a-way on the road. The automobile finally went around the wagon and went to Fairbury.

When the car reached Fairbury, passenger Livera Word told driver Leroy Carter the wagon incident was not right. She then urged him to take her gun and go back and shoot James Churchill. Leroy and Livera drove north on First Street, and he murdered James Churchill.

The police arrested Leroy Carter and took him to the county jail in Pontiac. Then a group of Fairbury men started towards Pontiac to lynch Leroy Carter for murdering James Churchill. The County Sheriff anticipated this problem. The Sheriff posted his deputies on the roads coming into Pontiac. The deputies met the Fairbury men and convinced them to return to Fairbury. Both Leroy Carter and Livera Word were given prison sentences for the murder of James Churchill.

A couple of nights after the murder, at about 10:30 PM, a party of men in automobiles drove out to Mr. and Mrs. Will Grisson's house south of Fairbury. Mr. Grisson was an African American farmer who worked for Sam Fendrick and other farmers in that neighborhood. The men in the automobile planted a burning cross in the Grisson's yard.

When a Blade reporter and Deputy Sheriff Hartley drove out that way the next morning, they met Mr. Grisson walking to town. He said he was coming into town to telegraph for money for himself and his wife to get out of Fairbury. In talking of the previous evening's affair, Mr. Grisson said there were some six or seven cars. The occupants of these cars put a burning cross in the yard and then shot at the house. The shot rattled against the windows, and some of it entered the side of the house. Mr. Grisson recounted that following the shooting, he and his wife blew out the lights. They then ran out the back door and across the fields to Quill Morris's home, where they remained all night. Mr. Grisson stated that the men did not try to enter the house. He said the cross was kept burning until about two o'clock in the morning. These same cars drove through the northwest part of town where some African Americans lived, and several shots were fired.

The U.S. Census shows an African American population in Fairbury of 92 in 1880, 62 in 1910, 24 in 1920, 50 in 1930, 20 in 1940, and 16 in the year 2000. The population of 24 in 1920 seems low and might be a data research error. Common last names in the Census

were Brown, Sears, Somerville, and Word. Over-all, the population of African Americans in Fairbury trended downwards after a peak of 92 residents in 1880.

An African Methodist Episcopal church yearbook shows the Fairbury church was still operating in 1967. Between 1968 and 1970, some current Fairbury men recall attending Boy Scout meetings in the little church. A new home was built on the same site in 1972, indicating the old church was torn down sometime between 1967 and 1972.

African Americans have always been fully integrated into Fairbury society. Since the founding of Fairbury, they have been essential contributors to the success of the community.

